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Years in Cultural Studies

Introduction: Years in Cultural Studies

Robert W Gehl

ABSTRACT This special section is another iteration of cultural studies telling its own story. In our particular iteration, we offer here essays focused on specific years in the history of cultural studies. Our aim is to provide a pedagogical resource, a place for documentation and excavation, and a forum for more storytelling.

During a panel at the 2018 Cultural Studies Association meeting, Steven Gotzler noted that "Cultural studies has always specialized in telling its own story."¹ Stories are powerful means for members of a field to understand their place in it, its history, and its social and political impact. We might debate the contents, narratives, or lessons the stories tell us, but we continue to tell them.

This special section of *Lateral*, "Years in Cultural Studies," is another iteration of cultural studies telling its own story. In our particular iteration, we offer here essays focused on specific years in the history of cultural studies. Our aim is to provide a pedagogical resource, a place for documentation and excavation, and a forum for more storytelling.

We see this work as heeding the call Ted Striphas made in his inaugural editorial statement as lead editor of the journal *Cultural Studies*. In "Caring for Cultural Studies," Striphas draws attention to the etymology of "culture," which implies cultivation.² He notes that such a connotation was twisted into patrician elitism by the likes of Matthew Arnold, but he also argues for the value of cultivation's connotations of growth, tending, and nurturing, a formation he calls "culture as care." Building on ideas from Phaedra Pezzullo, Achille Mbembe, and Vilém Flusser, Striphas asks, "What would it mean to imagine Cultural Studies as a 'care discipline,' or better yet as a *field* in which criticism and care cohabitate?"³

Care, for Striphas, is doing needed, infrastructural work to make cultural studies happen. This infrastructural spirit animates this special section, a collection of accessible, student-friendly histories of the field that allow all of us to learn more about its intellectual genealogies, struggles, and contexts. The authors who have contributed to this "Years in Cultural Studies" project are doing this care work. And, as I will discuss below, I want to invite others from the broader cultural studies community to join them and further cultivate our field.

The "Years in Cultural Studies" project was conceived during a grad seminar on the Histories of Cultural Studies, taught in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. The course was intended to trace—as best it could, given many constraints—the history of the field, focusing on the founding the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the UK in the 1960s and through to the field's expansion into North America. While the course engaged with cultural studies theories

and to a lesser extent methodologies, the course was far more invested in the historical and intellectual contexts in which those theories and methods were developed.

The graduate students in the course helped develop the Years project. The students approached this in small groups. Part of this was animated by the influence of the Birmingham Centre, whose members modeled collaborative forms of scholarship—even as the collaboration became strained, acrimonious, and unequal.⁴ Even as he trenchantly critiques much of the intellectual history of Birmingham-style cultural studies, Paul Smith notes that one redeeming quality about intellectual work at the Centre was its insistence on group collaboration in scholarship:

This [group collaboration] is one characteristic quality of British cultural studies that has not fared very well in the intervening years, and it is certainly something that did not survive its importation to the United States, where scholarship is most frequently an individualized endeavor. This is perhaps one aspect of the Centre's work that would be good to revive in the American context, as part of an effort to set a new agenda that extends and surpasses British work.⁵

Thus, to at least get some sense of what Birmingham-style collaboration was like, the students in Histories of Cultural Studies banded together in small groups and developed these essays, from the selection of the year to drafting to workshopping the resulting drafts. Even in the case of the solo-authored essay included from the class here, the authors workshopped their drafts and provided feedback to the rest of the groups.

In addition to predominantly working in small groups, the students also took heed of Carol Stabile's criticism of typical histories of cultural studies. In her plenary panel talk at the 2018 Cultural Studies Association conference, Stabile draws on the work of feminist philosopher Michele LeDuff to argue against the continued "virilophile preference" found in intellectual histories of cultural studies. The typical "history of cultural studies" syllabus, Stabile notes, excludes women and people of color; tokenizes topics like race, gender, and sexuality; and tends to reproduce the same citational practices (e.g., insert obligatory citation of Foucault here, insert obligatory citation of Adorno there, etc.). In sum, as Stabile argues, "By creating a tradition from which women and people of color have been vanished—by suppressing the existence of their intellectual work in the past—we facilitate the suppression of this work in the present."⁶

Moreover, in selecting to publish this care work in *Lateral*, the authors publishing here also take heed of an anxiety expressed by Stripling, specifically that "with significant exceptions, publishing in Cultural Studies now means participating in a highly professional, capital-intensive, global operation." He refers to this as "potential" cultural studies locked behind a paywall.⁷ Locking this work away would defeat the pedagogical purpose, which is why it is here in *Lateral*. *Lateral* is open access in more ways than one: while it free to read to anyone with Internet access, it is also just as importantly free to publish in—it does not have a "pay to publish" funding scheme. It also has a history of publishing work by graduate students. *Lateral* is a public service rendered by the Cultural Studies Association. As such, it is an ideal home for this project, which is aimed less at the "highly professional" end of Cultural Studies and more at those who want to learn more about the field, particularly students.

While they are aimed at students, the essays collected here are far from oversimplified. In the first essay to be published in this series, Mariah Wellman recovers a moment that has largely been ignored in histories of cultural studies: Stuart Hall's 1983 visit to Australia, where Hall delivered a presentation on the welfare state and encouraged Australian students to "demand equal rights as students, take control of what they're learning, and

how they are assessed.”⁸ As Wellman shows, Hall’s visit had a direct influence on the course of the Australian iteration of Cultural Studies, influencing the creation of the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*. And, of course, Wellman considers the next stop in Hall’s global travels: Illinois, USA, where he gave a series of lectures that resulted in the posthumous publication of *Cultural Studies 1983*.⁹ Wellman provides a concise overview of that new book, contributing to our intellectual understanding of its importance.

Additional essays from the Histories of Cultural Studies course will be published over the course of the year. These essays vary. They may stress historical moments and context or particular publications. They may focus on broad social movements or on individual scholars. They may focus strictly on the year in question or take a more expansive approach, gesturing towards genealogical influences or tracing relations forward from the year. I hope that these various approaches—and others not yet taken—provoke more contributions to this collection.

Because the work is not done. Along with the others involved in this project, including the authors of the initial essays and the broader editorial board of *Lateral*, I invite responses in future issues of *Lateral*. The authors and I fully recognize that these Years essays are incomplete. Events, concepts, publications are no doubt missed. And considering the globalization of Cultural Studies, with our positionality in the middle of the United States studying in the late 2010s, the essays here simply are not inclusive of all events in a year. Moreover, the course in which this project was conceived, Histories of Cultural Studies, predominantly focused on the United Kingdom and to a lesser extent the United States, and was limited to the years 1964 (with the founding of *The New Left Review*) to the present. Therefore, the entire history of cultural studies before “cultural studies” was named was not included, and this limitation influenced the shape of these particular essays.

Thus, contributions to this special section of *Lateral* might include:

- Responses to these essays: discussions of more publications, more social and political events, or more geopolitical contextualization. The goal of such responses would be supplemental, to build upon a collective project.
- Essays on years within the half-century history of the field formally called “cultural studies,” including the creation of university programs around the world, the publication of important texts, summaries of conferences, or historical and political contexts.
- And of course, essays on years before the formal foundation of Cultural Studies in the 1960s. We anticipate discussions of the historical and intellectual contexts that influenced the works of key figures like Antonio Gramsci. But we also reiterate Carol Stabile’s call for excavation of work outside the currently-accepted Cultural Studies canon. For example, as Stabile argues, “Black left feminists like Shirley Graham, Claudia Jones, Louise Thompson Patterson and others were intervening in culture years before cultural studies scholars made the call to do so, making anti-racist, proto-feminist culture and media in the decades before the Cold War made such work synonymous with subversion.”¹⁰

Thus, our call for more Years essays is a call for more care work in our field, to add to a collective project, to set aside virilphilism in favor of the hidden and marginalized, all with a goal to tell the cultural studies story once more and make its history even more legible to the next generation of cultural studies scholars.

Notes

1. Steven Gotzler, "Catalogues of Tradition: Figurative Frames for Historicizing Cultural Studies" (presentation, Cultural Studies Association Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, June 2, 2018). [↗](#)
2. Ted Striphas, "Caring for Cultural Studies," *Cultural Studies* 33, no. 1 (November 8, 2018): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2018.1543716>. [↗](#)
3. Striphas, "Caring," 8. [↗](#)
4. For example, see Women's Studies Group, introduction to *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination* (London: Hutchinson, 1978). [↗](#)
5. Paul Smith, "Birmingham–Urbana–Champaign 1964–1990; or, Cultural Studies," in *A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, ed. Imre Szeman, Sarah Blacker, and Justin Sully (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 70, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118472262.ch4>. [↗](#)
6. Carol A. Stabile, "Cultural Studies, Canons, and Coprolites" (unpublished keynote, Cultural Studies Association Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, June 2, 2018). [↗](#)
7. Striphas, "Caring for Cultural Studies," 5. [↗](#)
8. Mariah Wellman, "The Year in Cultural Studies: 1983," *Lateral* 8, no. 1 (2019). [↗](#)
9. Stuart Hall, Jennifer Daryl Slack, and Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). [↗](#)
10. Stabile, "Cultural Studies." [↗](#)

[Bio](#)

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Robert W. Gehl is a Fulbright scholar and award-winning author whose research focuses on contemporary communication technologies. After receiving his PhD in Cultural Studies from George Mason University in 2010, he joined the faculty of the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. There, he published over two dozens articles in journals such as *New Media & Society*, *Communication Theory*, *Social Media + Society*, and *Media, Culture and Society*. His books include *Reverse Engineering Social Media*, which won the Nancy Baym Book Award from the Association of Internet Researchers, and *Weaving the Dark Web*, published by MIT in 2018. He also has published a co-edited collection of essays, *Socialbots and Their Friends*. At Utah, he teaches courses on digital ethnography, the history of cultural studies, the communication technology/society relationship, and basic Web design.

